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Exhibition Review

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**Muzeum Narodowy w Kraków (National Museum, Cracow), Poland,
June 19–August 29, 2010**

In an insightful discussion of the Victoria & Albert Museum's 2008 exhibition "Cold War Modern," Tanya Harrod pointed out that, although Magdalena Abakanowicz (b. 1930) "went on to become world-famous" after the first Biennale Internationale de la Tapisserie in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1962, "she was the first among equals together with Ada Kierzkowska, Jolenta Owidzka, Wojciech Sadley and Anna Siedziwska" who "pushed the boundaries of tapestry beyond the slightly folky, figurative approach inspired by Jean Lurçat [and] favoured by nearly all the other exhibitors."¹ Harrod is right: Abakanowicz is the only one of her immediate contemporaries to achieve, and sustain, a unique type of international recognition and admiration. In the almost fifty years since her remarkable debut at Lausanne, she has had an estimated 150 solo exhibitions around the world and her work has continued to astound with its originality, its power, and its humanity. In the summer of 2010 the National Museum in Cracow, the main branch of Poland's National Museum, played host to a major



Figure 1

Magdalena Abakanowicz working on *Embryology*, 1980 (Photo: Artur Starewicz). Courtesy of Magdalena Abakanowicz and the Muzeum Narodowy w Kraków.

Polish retrospective of her work: it was entitled, simply *Abakanowicz*.

Although, as Bogdan Zdrojewski, Polish Minister of Culture and National Heritage, commented, Abakanowicz is "one of the most outstanding and recognizable ambassadors of Polish culture abroad," the largest exhibition of her work at Cracow's National Museum to date had been the display of three of her *Abakans* in 2007 (Kuryłek and Dziadkiewicz 2010: 5). Zofia Gołubiew, director of the National Museum, suggests Abakanowicz's gargantuan reputation outside her native country has created something of

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REVIEWED BY JOSEPH McBRINN

Joseph McBrinn lectures in Design History at Belfast School of Art, the University of Ulster, Belfast, Northern Ireland.

a paradox in Poland, especially in the pantheon of twentieth-century modern Polish art held in Cracow's National Museum:

In Poland we can find her work in Wrocław, in Poznań, in Łódź and in Warsaw—but not in Kraków. In this place that holds the largest of collections of works by Tadeusz Kantor, Alina Szapocznikow, Maria Jarema and other famous contemporary artists, as well as their great precursors from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the lack of contact with such an important and significant figure in the history of art must be regarded as a painful omission. (Kuryłek and Dziadkiewicz 2010: 9)

Abakanowicz as an exhibition could have been easily derailed by the overwhelming expectations placed upon it, but it didn't disappoint in any respect. It was a shrewdly selected and daringly designed display, which aimed, and succeeded, in giving a comprehensive overview of, and insight into, *Abakanowicz's* major works from 1967 to 2009. The exhibition was extremely tightly selected and centered remarkably, for such as prodigious figure, on only eight major pieces, or groups of pieces, which included *Round Abakan* (1967); *Embryology* (1978–80); *Back* (1976); *Friends* (2009); *Rune* (from the "War Games" series) (1993); *Faces Which Are Not Portraits* (a series of eight paintings) (1983); *Ucello VII*, *Ucello VIII*, and *Ucello IX* (2008); and *Reheaded* (1998). The exhibition was accompanied

by a small but superb catalog in Polish and English (in a beautiful, and appropriately tactile, buff card slipcase) with contributions from Bogdan Zdrojewski, Zofia Gołubiew, and the exhibition's curator Dominik Kuryłek's excellent essay "The Modern Spider Web in the Art Museum." The spider's web seems the perfect metaphor as Kuryłek suggests: "Tangled up in the museum like a spider's web, her work simultaneously represents and conceals the form it finds itself in" (Kuryłek and Dziadkiewicz 2010: 69). But like the exhibition itself, the catalog didn't feel unwieldy but rather authoritative yet accessible. As Dominik Kuryłek explained, in the creation of "a Gesamtkunstwerk of sorts in which the viewer must move 'within' the pieces of art, as such, walking around the works, experiencing this art with all the senses" the catalog was designed "to heighten the impression" (Kuryłek and Dziadkiewicz 2010: 9).

The exhibition was laid out with the desire "to carefully examine the artist's work from many different perspectives" in which the viewer did not just optically see but rather physically and psychologically experience the work (Kuryłek and Dziadkiewicz 2010: 9). This was achieved in the complex design of the exhibition, by the designer/curators Robert Rumas and Roman Dziadkiewicz, on the ground floor of Cracow's National Museum, itself an iconic modernist building. The dark, airy rooms proved a perfect setting for the work. At the center of the whole display was the *Round Abakan* (1967). After taking the Grand Prix at the 1965 São Paulo Biennale, *Abakanowicz* began experimenting

with these cocoon-like, pod forms that were suspended from the ceiling. The three-dimensional shapes have imperfect curves, slits, and a complex visual and physical vocabulary which stretches beyond the obvious referencing of vaginal imagery, eggs, and wombs: what Michael Brenson has called “cloaks-carpets-chambers-forests” (Brenson 1995: 56). The *Abakans*, as they became known, which were Abakanowicz’s first major breakthrough after her debut at the Première Biennale Internationale de la Tapisserie in Lausanne, are however perplexing works. Colossal yet intimate in their scale. Inviting yet unnerving in their color and tactility. In the 1960s they were like nothing else in contemporary art. The material itself, however, was much more groundbreaking, as it seemed to suggest clothing but on closer inspection it looks less and less like utilitarian cloth and more like bark, fur, or skin. Abakanowicz wove the material herself from sisal rope, a rough, industrially made cord, which she found discarded in

Poland’s harbors. She unraveled the sisal, often dyeing the untwined threads, which were themselves a composite of hemp, flax, and horsehair, to create her unique off-loom weaves. Indeed, walking into the *Abakanowicz* exhibition on a blistering hot Polish summer’s day, as your eyes readjusted to the darkness of the interior, you immediately felt the air become palpable, almost heady, with fiber particles. As Kuryłek states, it was his intention that upon entering the museum “visitors immediately feel trapped in a dusty, damp-smelling maze inhabited by imposing totems.”²

The name *Abakans* came from Abakanowicz’s own name and her father’s direct ancestor Abaka-Khan, a twelfth-century Ikhan of Persia, who was reportedly a great-grandson of Genghis Khan. Her family background and her immediate context in prewar and postwar Poland are, in many ways, central to the formation of her artistic identity. Although born into an aristocratic family, her

experiences of war-torn Poland, on the outskirts of Warsaw, make harrowing reading. She made all sorts of reinventions in the stifling postwar atmosphere of scrutiny and censorship, such as changing her first name from Marta to Magdalena when she moved to Warsaw to pursue further artistic training in the late 1950s. By the early 1960s, under the political leadership of Polish Communist Władysław Gomułka, there was a new de-Stalinization of culture and a move away from centralized Soviet policy in the arts. Although “Social Realism” prevailed, new, younger artists, such as the emerging Abakanowicz, were tolerated. Studying at Gdańsk Academy of Arts and then Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts, it was only at the end of her Warsaw training that she took classes in weaving, screen printing and textile design under teachers such as Anna Sledziewska, Eleanora Plutymaska, and Maria Urbanowicz. But it was Maria Laszkiewicz, the Polish sculptor and weaver, who put Abakanowicz’s name forward



Figure 2

Magdalena Abakanowicz, *Round Abakan*, 1967, fabric, 300 × 100 × 100 cm (Muzeum Narodowym we Wrocławiu). Installation view (opening night). Courtesy of Magdalena Abakanowicz and the Muzeum Narodowy w Kraków.

for the Lausanne Biennale, where *A Composition of White Forms* would change everything for her. What was remarkable about this work, an anti-tapestry in a way, was that out of the entrants from seventeen countries, which included designs from powerhouse modernists such as Henri Matisse and Le Corbusier, “Of the fifty-nine exhibits only nine were executed by the artists” themselves (Moholy 1962: 405). Abakanowicz was very much in tune with a new wave of art making that emerged in the 1960s and found her a captive audience in the West, especially the United States. As Elissa Auther has pointed out, of the principal figures of the wider “fiber arts” movement, as it became known as in the States, of the 1960s and 1970s, “With few exceptions, their work was characterized by a strong interest in ancient or ethnic textile cultures, elementary construction techniques, and the process of making by hand” (Auther 2002: 6).

For the curator Dominik Kuryłek, the *Abakans* are crucial pieces in the canon of modern art as they challenge the primacy of sight in the artwork, and drawing upon Rosalind Krauss’s *The Optical Unconscious* (1993) for his argument, he suggests they go against the “current of modernist opticalism founded on the epistemological basis of the visual” (Kuryłek and Dziadkiewicz 2010: 20). In his words, “To experience the *Abakan*, one walks around it, rubs against it, delicately pushes it, cuddles it, tenderly strokes it, smells it and tastes it” (Kuryłek and Dziadkiewicz 2010: 17). Physical contact, and more than just proximity, is central to these

artworks as they communicate “with the viewer through the ‘phantasm of touch’ ” and its “main receptor skin” (Kuryłek and Dziadkiewicz 2010: 69). As Kuryłek further suggests, by removing these works from the walls, Abakanowicz makes the viewer not an observer but participant. He sees them as a reversal of Luis Buñuel’s slashing of the eye in *Un Chien Andalou* (1928) “as Abakanowicz appears to ‘stitch up’ the eye, paradoxically finding out more about the invisible” (Kuryłek and Dziadkiewicz 2010: 21).

The central room of the exhibition was dominated by Abakanowicz’s *Back* (1976), twenty-six pieces made of stiff burlap, which give some insight into Abakanowicz’s first forays in figurative work in the 1970s. These figures, opened-up trunks of the human body, took up much of the room’s space and feel like eerie, headless, hollow casts of real people, which although grouped together seem to speak of solitude and suffering. As a child, Abakanowicz recalls she “built objects to safeguard my reticence and loneliness ... When guests came, I fled. The objects left behind were meant to replace me” (Abakanowicz quoted in Kuryłek and Dziadkiewicz 2010: 27). It is exactly what these figures succeed in doing—projecting a sort of universality wrought from subjective experience. Indeed, she states: “Although I have been traveling the world for nearly fifty years, I always take along with me my baggage of phobias, pressures, and experiences along with me from the postwar destruction and revolution, from the communist

**Figure 3**

Magdalena Abakanowicz, *Back* (26 pieces), 1976, jute, fabric, resin, 69 × 56 × 66 cm (Muzeum Narodowym we Wrocławiu). Installation view (opening night). Courtesy of Magdalena Abakanowicz and the Muzeum Narodowy w Kraków.

system of instrumental treatment” (Abakanowicz quoted in Kuryłek and Dziadkiewicz 2010: 25). If the *Abakans* played with the vocabulary of a universal female identity, as testified by their inclusion in the recent “WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution” at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in 2007, then it is interesting that Kuryłek draws attention to the ambiguous “maleness” of the bodies in *Back*.

The genderless identity of the seated figures in *Back* and in *Reheaded* (1998), a series of burlap standing figures also included in the exhibition, seems somehow male. Other works such as *Rune* (1993) from the “War Games” series, the last monumental piece in the exhibition, which is made from an enormous tree branch, also seems to reference the power of corporeal masculinity. With this work Abakanowicz may have

succeeded in making “disquieting creatures between nature and culture, evoking both sympathy and anxiety,” but there is an uncanny male muscularity about it (Kuryłek and Dziadkiewicz 2010: 49). “War Games” as a series may have played with the human/organic imagery, but the phallic, trunk-like quality of works such as *Rune* also inescapably recall the fetishized objects of military warfare such as artillery tanks. Kuryłek is not

Figure 4

Magdalena Abakanowicz, *Reheaded* (12 pieces), 1998, jute, fabric, resin, 180 × 60 × 45 cm (Collection of the Artist). Installation view (opening night). Courtesy of Magdalena Abakanowicz and the Muzeum Narodowy w Kraków.



**Figure 5**

Magdalena Abakanowicz, *Rune* (from the *War Games* series), 1993, wood, metal, 130 × 140 × 615 cm. (Collection of the Artist). Installation view (opening night). Courtesy of Magdalena Abakanowicz and the Muzeum Narodowy w Kraków.

the first to draw attention to this curious presence of masculinity in Abakanowicz's work. The American artist Mark Newport has argued that her "War Games" series relies on and maintains a traditional masculine paradigm through scale, materials, and form that equates masculinity with destruction. This allows Abakanowicz to critique a violent social history specifically linked to male behavior by recreating the physical intimidation at its core."³ Abakanowicz herself has commented of "War Games": "I looked at these huge bodies, muscular, wounded, but full of strength and personality: trunks with amputated limbs, in gestures of pain or protest or helplessness"—the redemption of masculinity perhaps (Abakanowicz 2008: 152).

The next room was filled by Abakanowicz's *Embryology* (1978–80) which was, as Jon Thompson notes, the "sole occupant of the Polish pavilion [and] was the one really notable exception as far

as the East European countries were concerned" at the 1980 Venice Biennale (Thompson 1980: 793). The work is a series of soft, oval, egg-like "stones" in various sizes from the minuscule to the monumental, made from sackcloth, stuffed with sisal, and roughly sewn together. For Kuryłek, "In *Embryology* Magdalena Abakanowicz makes a utopian effort to protect potential bodies from a tragic process—life headed for catastrophe" (Kuryłek and Dziadkiewicz 2010: 43). Yet, like nearly everything else in the exhibition, they seem unsettling yet comforting. And although in the 1980s and 1990s Abakanowicz turned increasingly to metals (and especially bronze) and also to wood, stone, and clay in the making of her sculptures, her ideas were, and indeed are, not always realized in three-dimensional form. Kuryłek selected, to end the show, a group of eight paintings by Abakanowicz entitled *Faces Which Are Not Portraits* (1983), and in their

monochromatic patterned facial imagery they differ on many levels from other works in the exhibition in that they are primarily "meant to taken in by the eye" (Kuryłek and Dziadkiewicz 2010: 61).

The last fifty years of Magdalena Abakanowicz's career have spawned much debate and this richly researched and provokingly planned retrospective was

**Figure 6**

Magdalena Abakanowicz, *Embryology*, 1978–80, sackcloth, hemp rope, sisal, nylon, from 4 to 250 cm. (Muzeum Narodowy we Wrocławiu). Installation view (opening night). Courtesy of Magdalena Abakanowicz and the Muzeum Narodowy w Kraków.

Figure 7

Magdalena Abakanowicz, *Faces Which Are Not Portraits* (8 paintings), 1983, oil on canvas, 100 × 78 cm. (Collection of the Artist). Installation view (opening night). Courtesy of Magdalena Abakanowicz and the Muzeum Narodowy w Kraków.



without doubt a major success for Cracow's National Museum. It is to be lamented that it ran for such a short time and did not travel. The power of the pieces selected often depends upon a mixture of the personal and the public and although monumental, they are never monuments. And, while they may reflect the identities of a postwar modernity, the specter of war is never very far away. Kuryłek goes to some lengths to place Abakanowicz with the context of modern Polish history by excavating how the past is ever present in her work. Indeed in Poland, as elsewhere, as the art historian David Crowley has pointed out, "Modernity has long been characterized in terms of a volatile mix of creative and destructive forces unleashed on the work. To realize the future means to consume the past."⁴ The subjective experience of the individual is also never very far away in these works and although it has often been noted that the "impact of Abakanowicz's work

is tremendously augmented by her willingness to be a public figure," she still remains somewhat mysterious (Milofsky 1987: 369). An encounter with the work of Magdalena Abakanowicz reminds us, however, just how unsettling and awe-inspiring as well as extraordinarily magical textiles as a medium can be.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1. Tanya Harrod, 2008. "Thinking Aloud: Cold War Craft." *Crafts* November/December: 25.
2. Giuseppe Sedia, 2010. "The Uncanny World of Magdalena Abakanowicz." *Kraków Post*, August 23.

3. Mark Newport, 1998. "The Masculine in Fiber." *Surface Design Journal* 22(3): 29.
4. David Crowley, 2003. *Warsaw*, p. 23. London: Reaktion.

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